

Switching Leads; The Changing Attitude Towards the Sweet Briar Riding Program

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Doing Sweet Briar History

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Appearing more graceful than a prima ballerina, the petite rider guides the huge, impeccably groomed horse around a tricky course of colorfully painted jumps. Stunning in her navy blue hunt coat, spotless khaki breeches, and shiny black boots, she is sweating beneath her black, velvet hunt cap. The judge and the spectators seem completely oblivious as she makes the difficult ride appear effortless. Her gallant steed soars over the last fence as if there were wings on his feet, and the crowd breaks into applause as the pair's near perfect performance wins them the coveted blue ribbon.

In a sport where success often centers around appearance it comes as no surprise that horseback riding would be a perfectly acceptable sport for the elite daughters of wealthy men during the 1920's and 1930's. The socially suitable, and noncompetitive nature of riding ultimately led to the creation of the riding program at Sweet Briar College, and enabled it to grow and become one of the best collegiate riding programs in the country. Originally created as an alternative activity to competitive sports, riding at Sweet Briar College evolved from a genteel pastime into a competitive and nationally reputed sport for women during the 1970's.

During the first half of the twentieth century, Southern women's colleges developed rules and traditions in order to put women on a pedestal.¹ Economic, geographic, and social issues caused Southern men to believe that the only way to maintain racial, social, and sexual supremacy was to preserve southern traditions, most importantly that of a charming, submissive beauty, the southern belle. Southern men were not the only supporters of Pedestal ideology, many women across the country accepted

¹ Amy Thompson McCandless, "Preserving the Pedestal: Restrictions on Social Life at Southern Women's Colleges 1920-1940", 1993 p.47.

antebellum stereotypes and voluntarily climbed onto the pedestal. Ladies were supposed to be an object of beauty and virtue, obedient, and above all noncompetitive.

During the college's first formative years, the Sweet Briar administration used its rural setting as a tool to promote pedestal ideals. Hidden away from the modern feminist thoughts that swirled around cities that many traditionalists thought to be dangerous, Sweet Briar students were encouraged to participate in genteel, outdoor pastimes. Located in Virginia's horse country, Sweet Briar's idyllic country setting consisted of classic brick buildings, elegant lawns, reflecting pools, and thousands of acres of grassy fields, which mirrored the beauty that the college was hoping to promote in its students.² Presenting the image of a genteel lady, and believed to help maintain good health, the enjoyment of nature played an important role in Sweet Briar's extracurricular activities. Students were encouraged to participate in non-competitive open-air activities such as hiking, boating, and horseback riding.

In accordance with pedestal ideology, noncompetitive sports were encouraged at Sweet Briar College during its early years. Although team sports such as basketball, and tennis existed during Sweet Briar's early years, they were thought to be aggressive and possibly pose a threat to student life. "Competition in athletics is confined to contests between the classes of the college and the academy; this is an important feature, developing the universal spirit of interest and participation so necessary to beneficial exercise without exaggerating the importance of the contests to a nerve racking strain, as

² Young Women's Christian Association, "Sweet Briar College Handbook 1918", p.42.

is unfortunately the case in many intercollegiate contests.”³ Encouraging women to be aggressive and compete during this time period was completely against pedestal ideals. Thus, noncompetitive sports were encouraged and the riding program was born.

Historically an aristocratic sport, riding proved to be a socially safe activity for the college to offer its young, wealthy pupils. The College’s prime location, allowed it to provide a riding program that would be a foil to the competitive sports offered. Riding was hugely popular with students and administration alike because of its socially acceptable nature.

In the first formative years of the college, riding proved more of a hobby than a sport, with no horses on campus, interested students and their families rented horses from the nearby Amherst Livery. Twilight rides, picnics, and the occasional foxhunt existed as the main activities of the riding program. It wasn’t until 1924 when the Harriet Howell Rogers began her forty yearlong term as a director of riding that the program began to blossom and grow. The energetic horsewoman persuaded the college to establish a riding stable on campus, and organized the first horse shows and foxhunts. In order to create a uniform excellence among her scholarly riders, Rogers instituted annual rating centers that became a trademark of the college.⁴

Just five years after the first horses were brought to campus, the May Day show of 1929 exemplified the growth of the riding program. Although the show was closed to outside riders, and it wasn’t the first appearance of competition, it demonstrated the growing reputation of talented Sweet Briar riders. A new riding ring was constructed for

³ Young Women’s Christian Association, “Sweet Briar College Handbook 1918”, p.42.

⁴ Sweet Briar College, “Riding Program Brochure”, circa 1975, p. 7

the event, and three cups were awarded to outstanding riders. Students were advised to bring pillows on which to sit, as the bleachers were reserved for visitors.⁵ During the 1930's, foxhunting existed as one of the most thrilling and demanding sports in which a Sweet Briar riders participated.⁶ Historically a sport of kings, foxhunting had many social rules that regulated what riders may wear, how horses should be groomed, and where they may ride in the hunt field. The chase, generally followed by a traditional post-hunt breakfast party, provided many opportunities for the elite to rub elbows. (footnote 6)

Originally purely social in nature, the traditional foxhunt began to be replaced by competitive forms of the event. In relation with the gravity of World War II, the pomp and succor of foxhunting may have seemed a bit frivolous, perhaps causing local hunts to cease their activities. Despite the lack of hunting opportunities, the Sweet Briar riders demonstrated their ingenuity and made lemonade out of lemons, and foxes out of students. In 1945, two students dressed up as foxes in order to create a "paper chase". A group of riders on horseback followed the trail of paper cross country in hot pursuit of the "foxes".⁷ Discarding the staunch traditional rules and social activities associated with foxhunts, the group galloped across Sweet Briar's rolling hill for sheer fun. Seemingly silly, this event demonstrates that riders were no longer riding solely for social reasons.

Whether riding for pleasure or competition, the equestrian program steadily grew and expanded at Sweet Briar over the following twenty-five years. Moving away from social events, the riding developed a national reputation for competition and was a

⁵ "Horse Show Offers Seven Ring Event", Sweet Briar News, 1 May 1929, p.1,3.

⁶ "Thanksgiving Day Hunt to Start at 7 A.M.", Sweet Briar News, 20 November 1930, p.4.

⁷ "Foxhunt 'Staged' Thanksgiving Day", Sweet Briar News, 20 November 1945, p.4.

forerunner in modern forward seat riding, hunter paces, and horse trials. Horse trials, now more popularly known as three day eventing, are comprised of a cross country jumping phase, dressage test, and a stadium jumping phase; testing both horse and rider talent and endurance.

The product of Sweet Briar's rigorous riding program, student Lendon Gray '71, nationalized the excellent reputation of Sweet Briar's riding program when she placed third in the American Rally, and first in the Canadian Rally, where she was the only United States rider to compete. Invited to train at the Olympic Center for the summer, gray returned to Sweet Briar and graduate the following year in 1971 and less than a decade later, represented the United States in the 1980 Olympic games.⁸ Gray went on to write many books, and again represent the United states in the 1988 Olympic games, and many other famous international riding competitions. The success of Lendon Gray exemplifies the excellent competitors that the Sweet Briar Riding Program was producing during the late 1960's and early 1970's.

In 1970, plans were underway to construct a modern riding center that would symbolize the excellence of Sweet Briar's riding program. The highly anticipated completion of the riding center was described as, "truly an addition to the college community, the new riding center should equal or surpass that of any other comparable

⁸ "Lendon Gray Places High in National Riding Events", Sweet Briar News, 6 October 1970, p.8.

institution”.⁹ The fall of 1971 revealed a modern facility named for Harriet Howell Rogers. The construction of the center was funded by an anonymous donor and upon its dedication was described as, “huge, bright, airy, and clean enough for a King’s banquet table”¹⁰

In truth the Sweet Briar community had created a facility that equaled or surpassed any other riding program in the nation in its quality and modernity. Boasting an indoor ring bigger than a football field, 49 roomy box stalls to house campus horses, a spacious combined classroom and lounge, the main building was flanked by two other smaller barns, and a myriad of paddocks for turnout. Also consisting of two fields full of jumps, a huge outdoor ring, and over 3,000 acres on which to ride, the facilities at Sweet Briar became a very important symbol of the excellence of its riding program.¹¹

Over the next decade the riders at Sweet Briar became fierce competitors, dominating local, regional, and national competitions. The new facilities at Sweet Briar drew world famous trainers and riders, and in addition to the knowledgeable Sweet Briar instructors, riders received the best instruction, and it showed. Though competing at the highest levels of competition, riders continued to foxhunt, and ride for pleasure. In the fall of 1978, over forty alumnae returned to the college for a riding reunion. During the three-day reunion, alums were invited to compete in an on campus horse show, and hunt

⁹ “SBC Moves Ahead With Improvements; Physical Plant Expanded in Summer”, Sweet Briar News, 2 October 1970, p.1.

¹⁰ “The Dedication of the Harriet Howell Rogers Riding Center”, Alumnae Magazine, Winter 1972, p.29.

¹¹ “The Dedication of the Harriet Howell Rogers Riding Center”, Alumnae Magazine, Winter 1972, p.29.

which pitted current students against past students.¹² In the fall of 1979, the intercollegiate riding team captured their first national title. Competing against many schools, the team garnered the award of high point team champions.¹³ In the spring of 1980, Sweet Briar riders of all levels and experience swept the prizes at the 53rd annual horse show, a member of the riding program captured every major championship.¹⁴

The same year Sweet Briar riders captured the coveted Affiliated National Riding Council Championship, dominating the competition in both written and riding phases. The scholars proved knowledgeable and talented in dressage sportif, cross country, and stadium jumping. Given the opportunity to voice their opinions, competitors Kathy Taylor '80 states, "We really have one of the best riding programs. Mr. Cronin is great, he really backed us up and coached us to get ready", while teammate Darla Davis '80 agreed, "Sweet Briar college's riding program is excellent".¹⁵

Adding another prestigious title, the 1980 SBC intercollegiate riding team collected the Intercollegiate Championship for the third year in a row. Whether they were winning in horse shows or grabbing top honors at hunter paces, the excellent performances by Sweet Briar riders thrust the college into the spotlight. During this time period brochures advertising the riding program were developed in order to attract

¹² "Briar Riders Regroup", Sweet Briar News, 29 September 1978, p4.

¹³ "Intercollegiate Horse Show Riders Capture Championship", Sweet Briar News, 13 March 1980, p8.

¹⁴ "Vixen Riders Sweep Prizes in 53rd Annual Show", Sweet Briar News, 13 March, 1980, p8.

¹⁵ "Riders Capture Top Honors", Sweet Briar News, 10 April 1980, p8.

prospective students and appeal to alumnae to donate money to the expensive yet worthy cause.¹⁶

Although the riding program at Sweet Briar College was rooted in pedestal ideals, the plan to produce noncompetitive riders backfired. The more accomplished Sweet Briar riders became, the more competition they desired. Sweet Briar initially and unintentionally became infamous for its riding program, but later embraced its excellent competitive reputation in order to draw students to Sweet Briar. Now a little over 80 years old, the Sweet Briar riding program is still alive and strong. Weathering the change of time well, the program has grown from a sophisticated hobby into a collegiate sport that draws hoards of students to Sweet Briar every year.

¹⁶ Paul D. Cronin, "Boot, Saddle, to Horse, and Away", Alumnae News, Spring 1976 p34-37.

Works Cited

A. Primary

Riding Program Brochures, Sweet Briar College, 1970-1980.

These brochures are located in the Sweet Briar archives, on the left, above the Sweet Briar handbooks. These brochures contain a wealth of information about the early history of the riding program, and the current state of the program during the 1970's.

Sweet Briar College Alumnae Magazine, Sweet Briar, Va, 1933-present

This source is located in the Sweet Briar archives on the shelf below the Brambler, and above the Sweet Briar yearbooks. This source provides a wealth of information but appears a bit biased because it is sent to alumnae in hopes that they will donate money to the school.

The Sweet Briar News, Sweet Briar College, 1927-present

All of the articles appear to be very valuable sources. Often a bit dry, as they were mostly recaps of riding events, the information proved very valuable. It was difficult to find student opinion, but a few student quotes could be found.

B. Secondary

McCandless, Amy T., "Preserving the Pedestal: Restrictions on Social Life at Southern Colleges for Women, 1920-1940", *History of Higher Education Annual*, 7 (1987) p1-50.